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General

KITAJ

Ends
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LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART, LYTTON GALLERY

LOS ANGELES: County Mus. of Art

R B KITAJ

Paintings
and
Prints
August 11
to September 12, 1965
Lytton Gallery
Los Angeles County Museum of Art

This exhibition was organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in cooperation with the Museum's Contemporary Art Council.

250202

Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Los Angeles County

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65-P914

Introduction

A basic pictorial principle of R. B. Kitaj's work was gleaned from Abstract Expressionism: to make the entire picture surface active at all points. Called "all-over" painting by Pollock, DeKooning and Rothko it appears as "plural energies" in Kitaj's paintings, with their seemingly random dispersion of figurative images and colorful shapes and the absence of any setting or background. (One is often reminded of DeKooning's description of his space as "both inside and outside at the same time.") The forms are usually not centralized, balanced or ordered in any readily perceivable manner. One finds one's way by focusing on distinct images, compelling and provocative in their own right, which after a time become mysteriously integrated into a total image. The best paintings — Kitaj refers to them as the most "ambitious" works — are those in which complex, multiple images eventually fuse, contradictions and paradoxical configurations nourish each other. Looking at a Kitaj is like seeing a motion-picture condensed into a moment.

Kitaj however has directly reacted against the sensuous surface and "brushy" drawing of the older American art. Although brightly colored, his surface is thin and dry. In this way he is related to virtually all of the most inventive painters of his generation, including those contemporaries most unlike him, those whose work is "nonrelational" and has "object-quality." Unlike the "all-over" — almost repeatable — nature of a 1950 Pollock or of a DeKooning of the same year, where fragmented parts of each have a similar character, Kitaj has aimed at maximum diversity (machine-gunners below, biomorphic shapes and a woman dressing above). Kitaj has tried also to legitimize an array of technical devices previously foreign to "serious" painting and to harness themes and subjects, especially literary and historical ones, spurned in modern art. His style is compounded, in different moments, of elements from "comic strips, graffiti, newspaper illustration, children's art and high-pressure advertising" (John Russell). His subjects are drawn from urban folklore (there's a tinge of the Thirties about them — political rebels, crusading editors, paladins and gangsters: the heroes and villains of the big-

city) and from arcane scholarship ("A Study of Siouan Cults," by J. O. Dorsey, 1894; "Physique and Character," by E. Kretschmer, 1925). Older art is much in evidence in Kitaj — incorporated into paintings and prints as reproductions (as of a sculpture by Canova) or even in the original (the Legros etching in "Dismantling the Red Tent"). Photographs appear too, and odd snapshots are granted the status of art. *Art History* — the study of art — is just as important in the paintings as Art: Kitaj has been especially intrigued by the Courtauld Institute's methodological researches in iconography. Kitaj's works seem, however, a metaphor of Malraux's idea of the "Museum without Walls" — that apotheosis of the stylistic basis of art. In this respect Kitaj's Museum might be considered a Temple of Information rather than an art museum, for the paintings breathe their maker's insatiable need to *know* everything.

Kitaj was in London in his artistically formative years (1958-64), and he did not have much contact with contemporaneous art developments in the United States. Nevertheless, his work is related in its attitude to commercial art techniques, snapshot photography, and certain topical subjects with several younger American painters, including Nicholas Krushenick, Peter Forakis, Joe Raffaele, Ed Ruscha, and Philip Rich. These artists, each working without knowledge of the others, have all developed styles which adopt an oblique stance to what may be thought of as doctrinaire Pop art (Warhol, Lichtenstein, Rosenquist), with its singular allegiance to a *specific* popular style or subject (soupcan, comic strip, billboard). Kitaj and these artists have, rather, been intrigued by underlying and various stylistic concepts which attend popular contemporary imagery: heraldic or emblazoned images encased in black grids: abstract shapes conceived like comic-strip characters; ambiguous calligraphy (equally sign and bulbous shape); the close-up news photo. With these artists, the peculiarly affecting *styles* behind our common public art have been removed from their native context and have been put into personal service. Of these artists, Kitaj is the most free wheeling and complex. His pictures are to be inspected and experienced as the product of a rare and fecund sensibility.

In May, 1965, R. B. Kitaj provided written replies to ten questions I had sent him about his work:

M T: You told me that you went to London more or less out of chance, and stayed because of situations that developed, rather than out of some deep need being served by that city. Do you think your work would have taken on the same *basic shape* if you had lived in America?

R B K: I strongly suspect that my painting would *not* be as it is had I returned to America some years ago. Roughly speaking, the fresh, engaging currents in post-War art have been running here in N. Y. for some long while now and the strengths in American art very often seem to rub off at close quarters (DeKooning through Rauschenberg through Johns, et al)... No doubt one could not have avoided peculiarly *American* experience and equations therefrom.

M T: What do you think is your relationship to Pop art — English or American?

R B K: I still balk at the word Pop... Real Pop (not art) bores hell out of me but often when High Camp insinuates itself into recent art, the results are engaging (given the quality, intrinsic and relative of the art-piece at hand). I guess I've decided on occasion in favor of certain Camp themes or passages but not often enough to get pinned down.

M T: You wrote, "Some books have pic-

tures and some pictures have books"—a marvelous evocation of your work. The look and feel of books as material things, as well as their value as containers of ideas, obviously fascinates you in your work. But *filmic* kinds of association and transmutation are also apparent in the organization and tone of your work. Do movies interest you for painterly reasons?

R B K: Yes, movies are great... I love them ... but I haven't seen more than ten this last year. I would rather see a movie than a play. Movies *must* be a prime animating factor for me... as you say—FILMIC—that sounds like a goodish word. I wouldn't mind achieving the *scope* of films like Lost Horizon or Seven Samurai or any number of others in pictures ... *Plural* energies engage my hopes for picture-making rather than *Less* is More (Noland et al) and Film Sense moves me.

M T: Would you comment on your interest in *Ut pictura poesis?*

R B K: Poetry, as everyone knows, can be very good and the little poetry I know about has been very good for me. Pound, for instance (and with the help of a Poundian like Kenner) fires me up and has done so since age 18. Poetry—*weighs* for me ... *plural* energies again and scope and range and what Charles Olson has called "high-energy constructions" which I take to mean that a poem can be something upon which has been expended as much good heat at as many points as has been possible. As in poetry, so it is in painting. I've tended to *look* at good poetry and very often a *sense of interval* will suggest *itself* to painting for me.

M T: Photographs of yourself were reproduced in both Marlborough catalogues. Do you think of your work as autobiographical in any special sense?

R B K: If there is a *special* sense in which autobiography associates with my painting it has to do with the chance that autobiography can be Literature and that Literature can find ways into the generation and fabric of picture-making according to my lights. The photographs you mention, I value as *SNAPSHOTS* also and these snapshots, much like found objects, have made their way into pictures.

M T: Do you work from sketches? Does one figure suggest the others as you work, or is the entire image rather clear in your mind before you start on a large canvas?

R B K: I almost never work from drawings. May do one day though ... I can't tell. The entire composition is rarely clear in my mind to begin with. I often think it ought to be though ... I'm not convinced that painting need be such a religious experience. ...

M T: The heroic failures in history, the destruction of idealistic attempts—this strikes me as a significant aspect of your work. Is that correct?

R B K: Heroic Failure—yes—great stuff ... Durrutti's funeral in Barcelona ... Even what Leroi Jones calls "assuaging leaking consciences" sounds finer to me than all the two-bit successes of an art which has become marginal ... and that goes for my own painting if and when it doesn't "fail" as well as for the purists.

Dissent and art just seem made for each other ... one seems to have been brought up to believe that. Sartre describes somewhere the disgust he and some of his colleagues felt in the thirties when artists would strut like nightingales, singing or lamenting as was their mission—while Europe went to hell. He suggests that the ideal of a *universal* and *immortal* art meaning for one century what it may mean for another is for the birds.

M T: Your early works reveal an admiration for Francis Bacon. Which artists hold

the greatest appeal for you now?

R B K: Yes, I know that people think I've been influenced by Bacon and I am sure that is true — But often it seems to me that those earlier debts are to DeKooning whom I've always admired greatly. I think those debts are most clearly seen in "Erasmus Variations" which is the first painting of any interest I made in England. Otherwise: Cezanne, Bonnard, Matisse . . . the usual stuff . . . and the Ernst of the Semaine de Bonté and German Romanticism and Ryder and Hopper and Dickinson and Balthus and old Morandi and Rauschenberg and Johns and Duchamp.

M T: Do you conceive of reading time as a necessary part of your working method?

R B K: Yes.

M T: What, ideally, would you wish art to do?

R B K: I would like it to *do* research. I would like it to get a job. I would like it to *do* more useful tasks than it's been doing. I would like it to subvert the outstanding prescriptions for what it ought to be. I don't like the smell of art for art's sake. I'm guilty of many of art's sins.

Maurice Tuchman

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Richard Brown Baker, *New York*

Mr. and Mrs. Michael Blankfort, *Los Angeles*

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Dr. and Mrs. Joseph Gosman, *Toledo*

The Earl of Gowrie, *Somerville, Mass.*

James Grady, *Atlanta*

David Pincus, *Philadelphia*

Alan Power, *Richmond, Surrey, England*

Miss Joan Reeves, *New York*

Henry Scott Stokes, *Tokyo*

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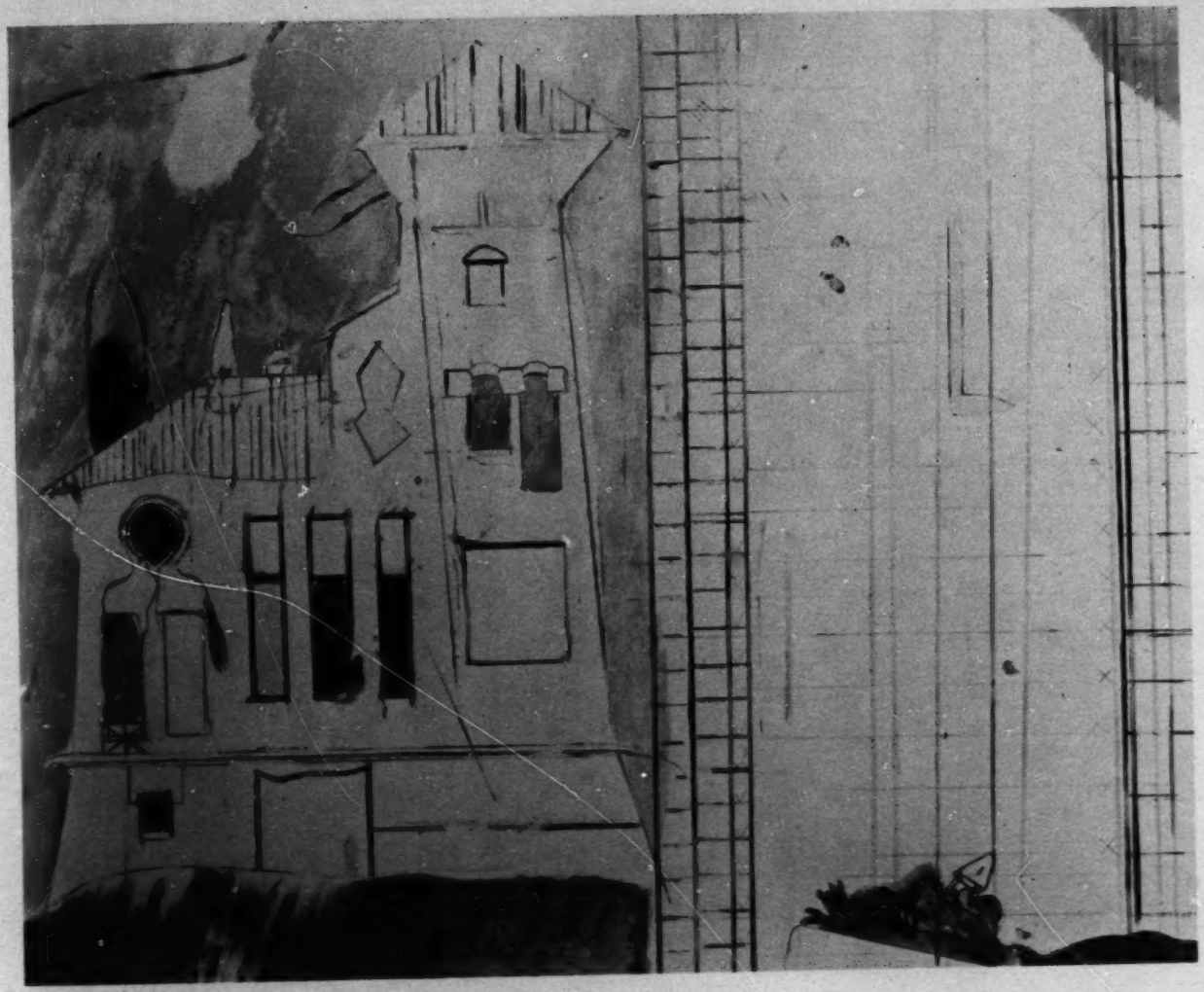
Museum of Modern Art, *New York*

Tate Gallery, *London*



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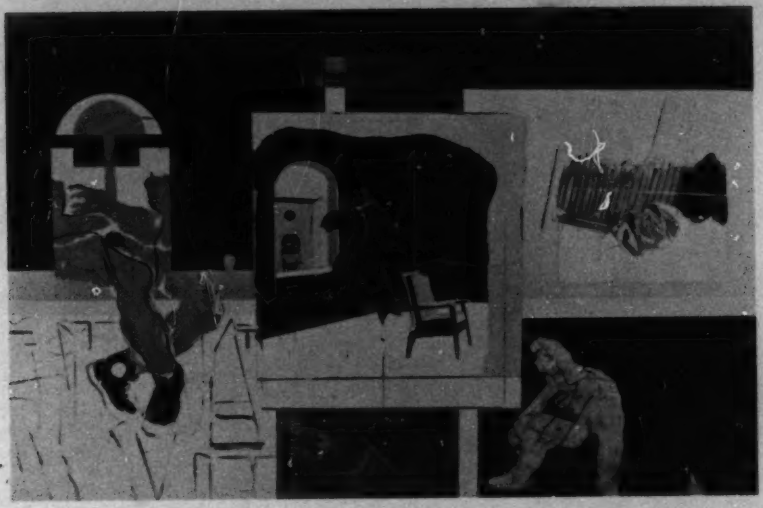

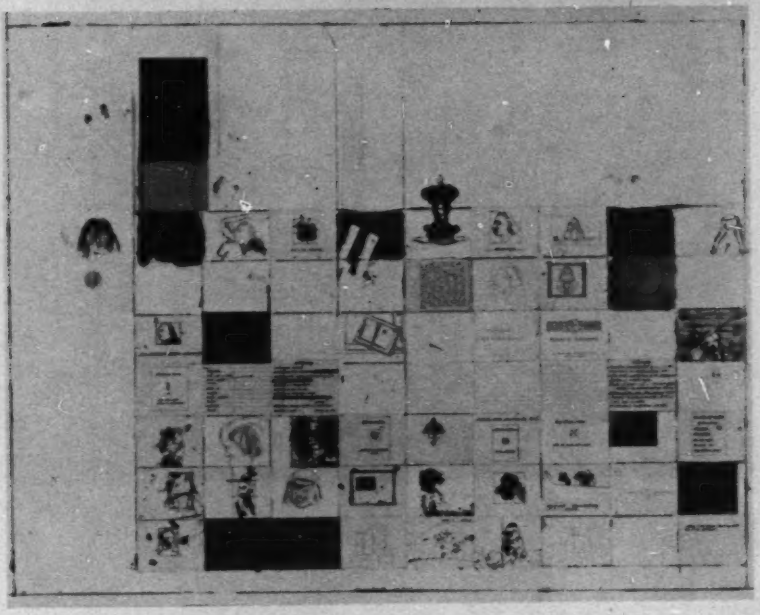

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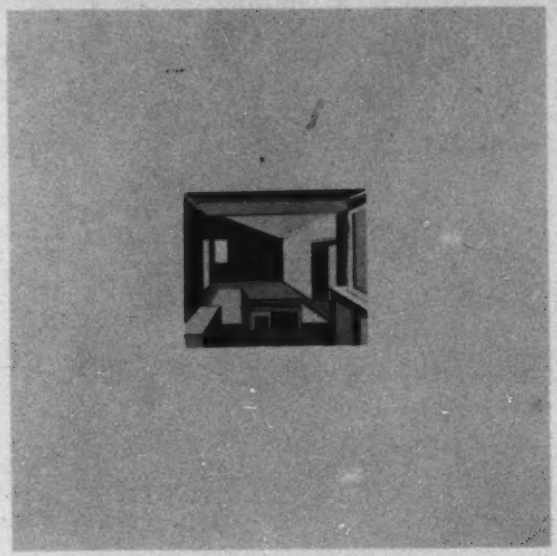

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1962. Oil on canvas. 30 x 20".
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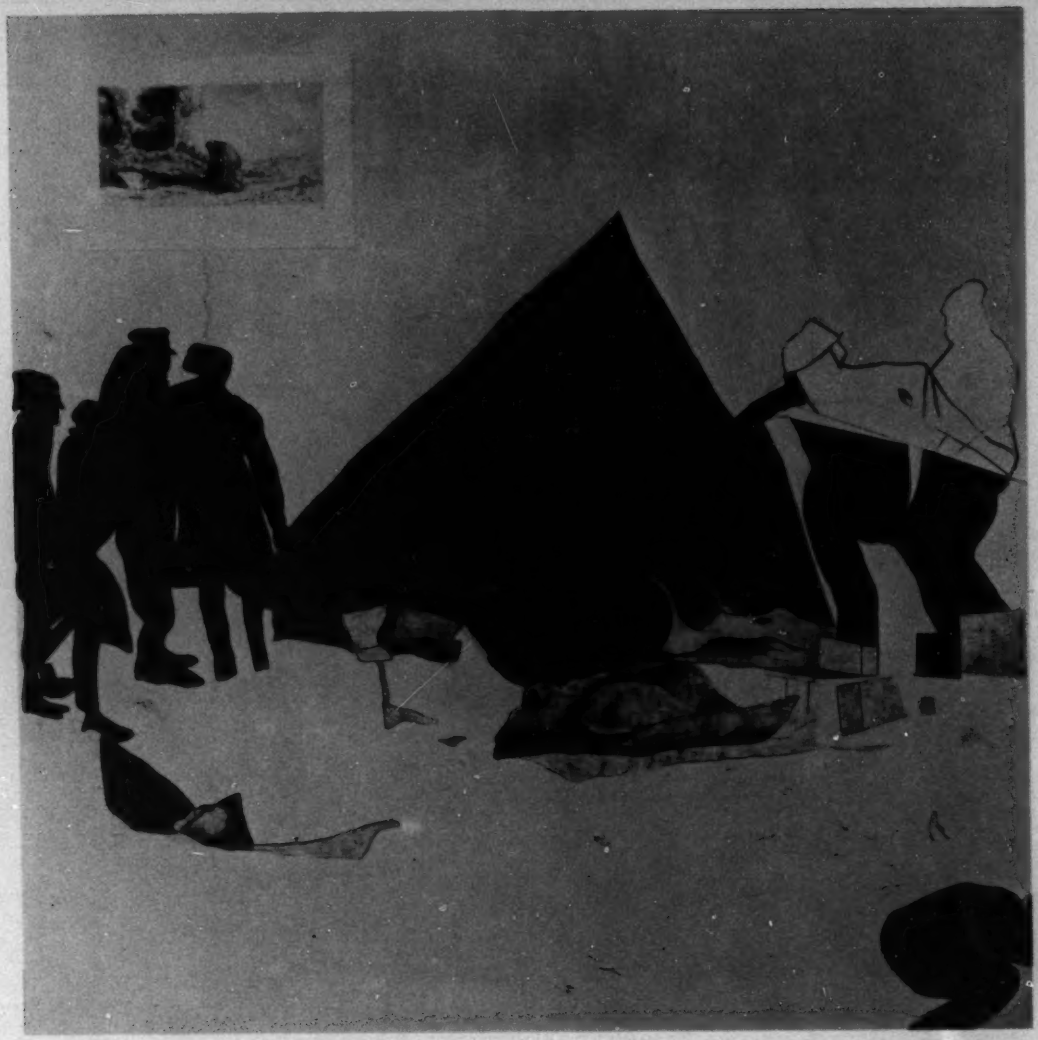

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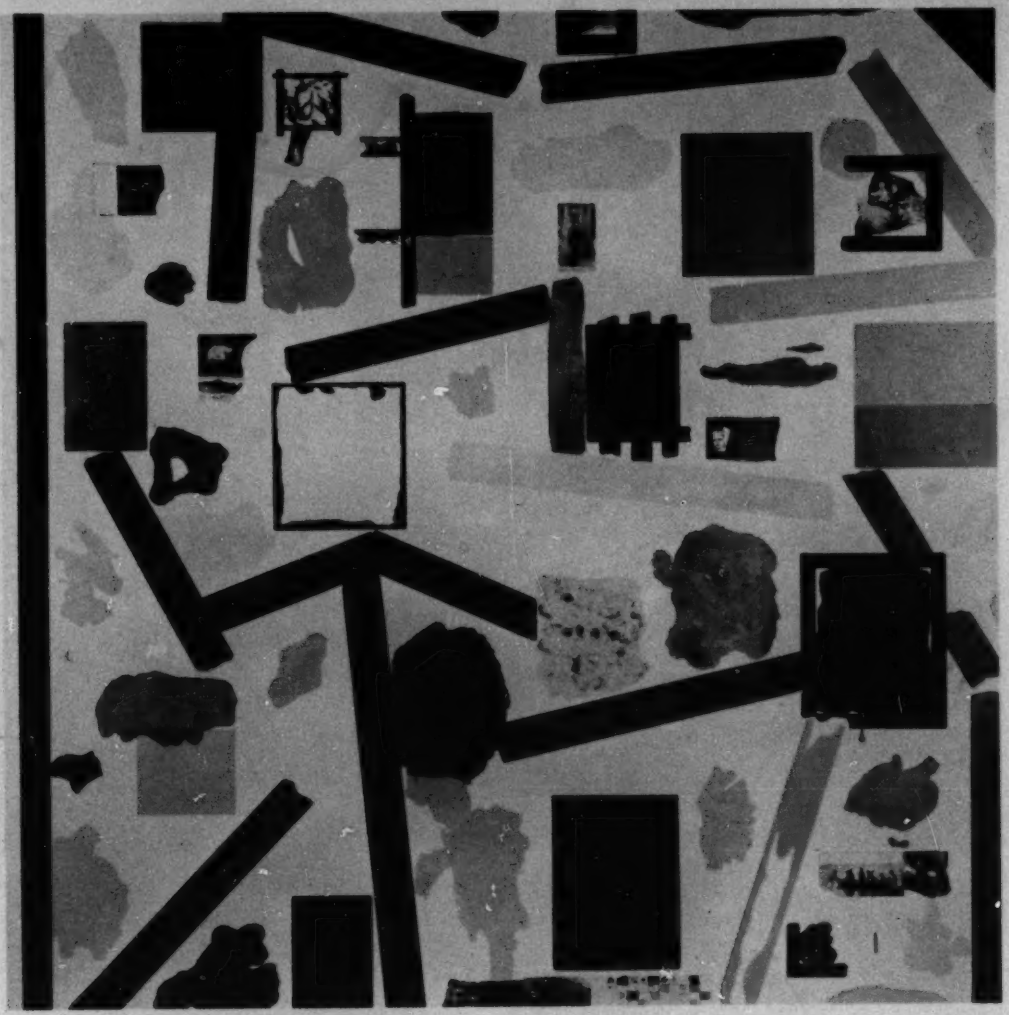

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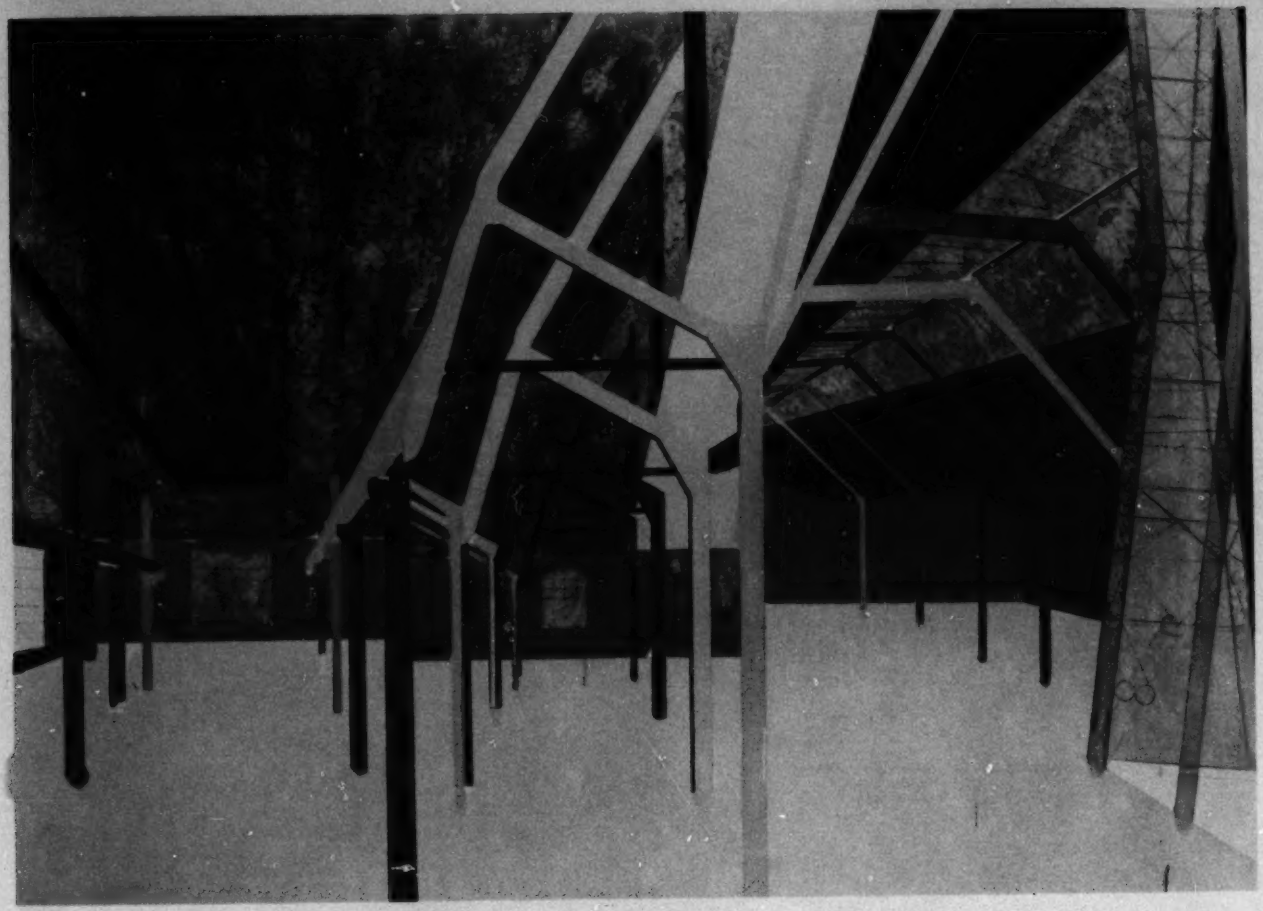

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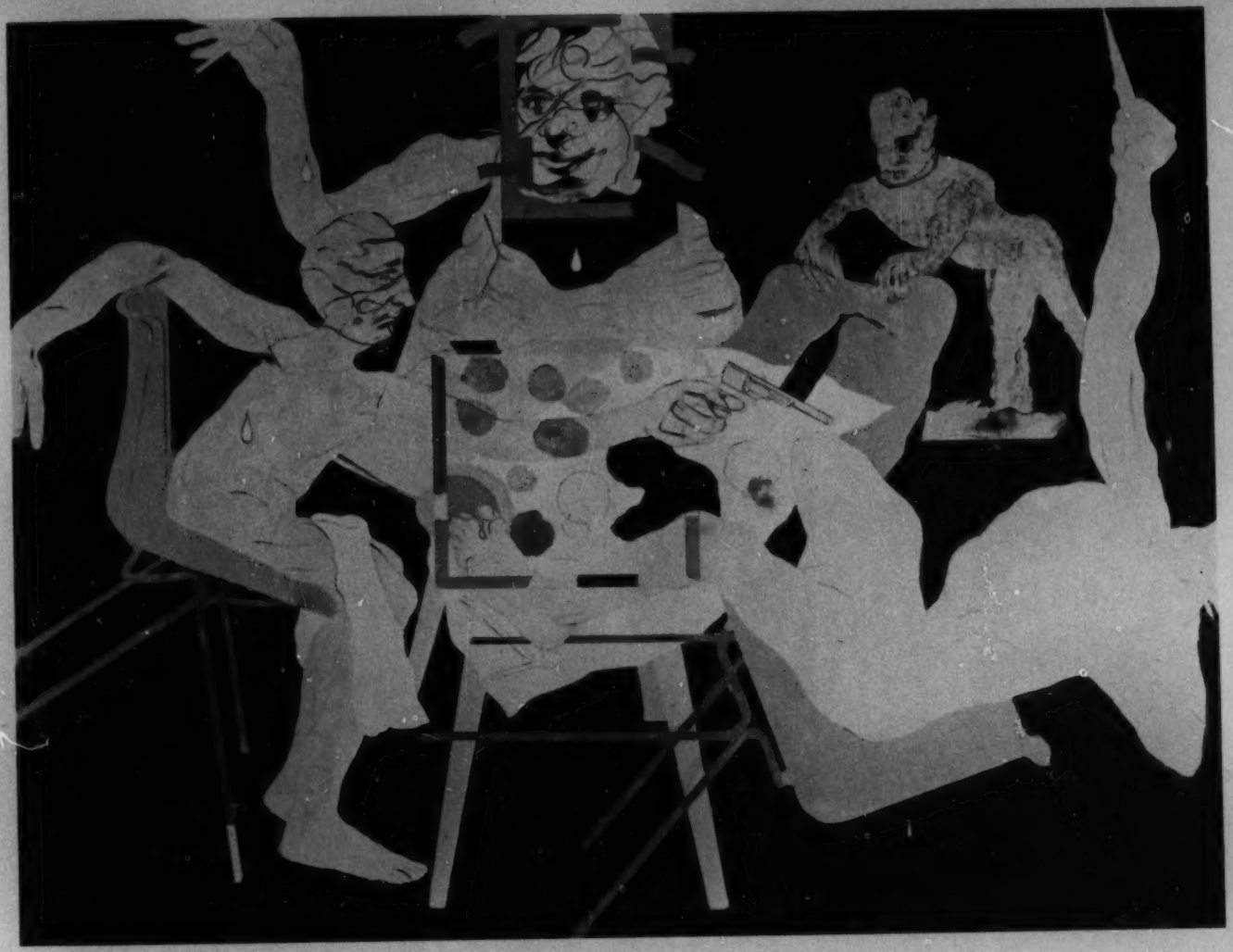

18. *London By Night: Part 1*. 1964.
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19. *Total Recall: The Great Cleveland Infield and Mound Staff of 1948.* 1964.
Oil on canvas. 6 x 60".
Lent by the artist.

20. *The Nice Old Man and the Pretty Girl (With Huskies).* 1964.
Oil on canvas. 48 x 48".

21. *An Urban Old Man, Who Never Looked at the Sea, Except Perhaps Once.* 1964. Oil on canvas. 50 x 40".
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22. *Where the Railroad Leaves the Sea.*
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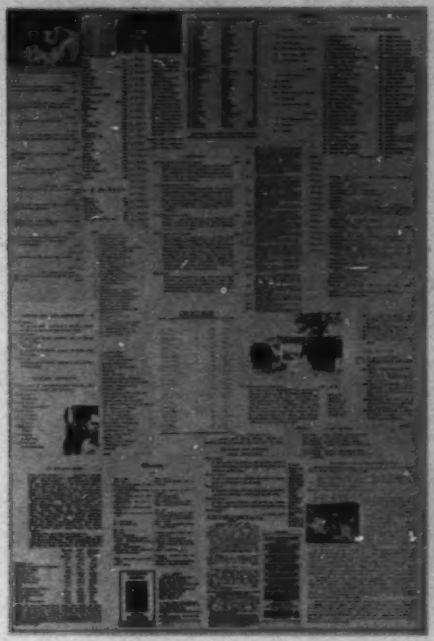

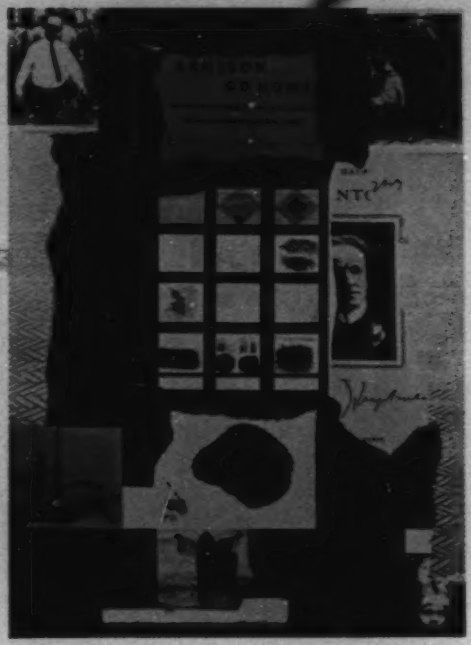

Prints

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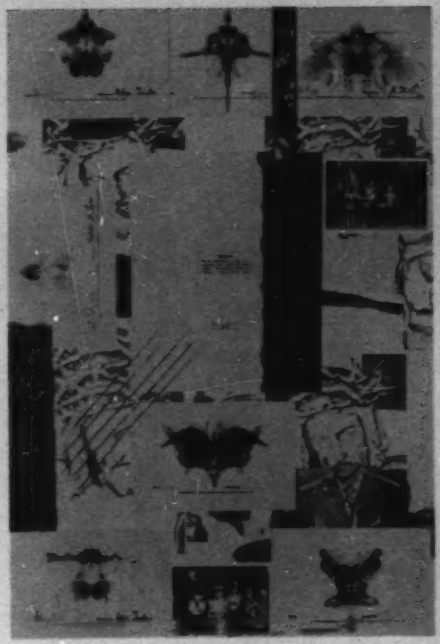

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Screen print: edition of 50
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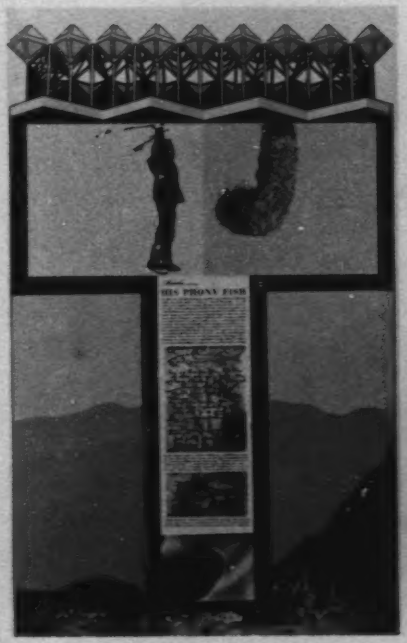

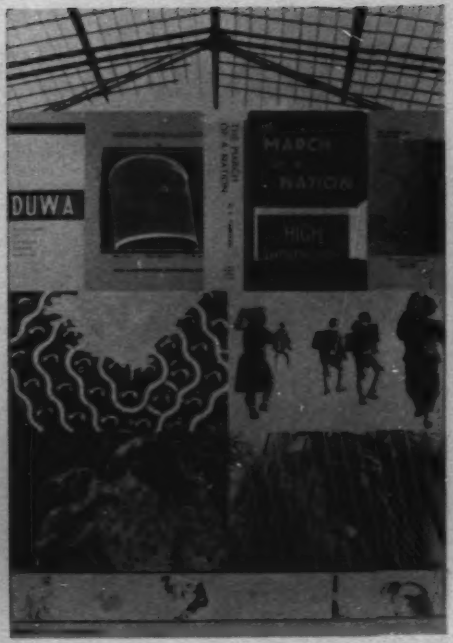

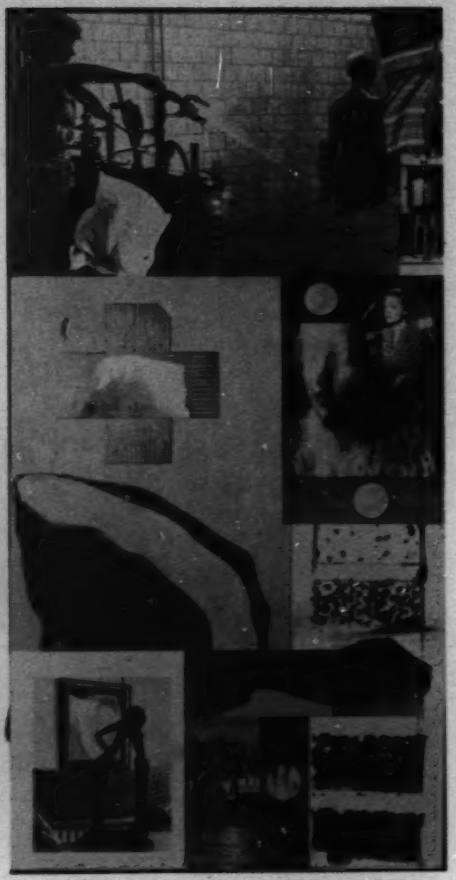

33. *The Flood of Laymen*. 1964. Screen print: edition of 75. 30 x 20".

34. *What is a Comparison?* 1964. Screen print: edition of 75. 30 x 20".

36. *The Republic of the Southern Cross*. 1964. Screen print: edition of 75. 30 x 20".

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Marlborough-Gerson Gallery, Inc.
New York

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The following prints, nos. 33-40, belong to the Mahler series.

"Jonathan Williams has written 41 poems responding to Mahler symphonies and I have begun (Fall 1964) to make a run of prints using the music, the poems, the Mahler literature and times and a good deal else as a compound crutch upon which to hang much that cannot be made to splice easily with Mahler." *R. B. Kitaj.*

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Screen print: edition of 75. 30 x 20".

34. *What is a Comparison?* 1964.
Screen print: edition of 75. 30 x 20".

35. *The Republic of the Southern Cross*. 1964. Collage (including screen on canvas and oil on canvas) on wood. 48 x 24".

36. *The Republic of the Southern Cross*. 1964. Screen print: edition of 75. 30 x 20".

37. *Helle bore: For Georg Trakl*. 1964.
Collage on board. 27½ x 19".

38. *Helle bore: For Georg Trakl*. 1964.
Screen print: edition of 75. 30½ x 22¼".

39. *The Desire for Lunch is a Bourgeois Obsessional Neurosis*. 1965.
Screen print: edition of 75. 30 x 20".

40. *The Gay Science*. 1965.
Screen print: edition of 75. 30 x 20".

Biography

R. B. Kitaj was born in Cleveland, Ohio in 1932. In the 1950s he studied at the Cooper Union in New York, the Academy of Fine Art in Vienna and under G. I. Bill at Oxford University's Ruskin School of Drawing and the Royal College of Art, London.
Kitaj has resided in London since 1958.
One-man exhibitions were held at Marlborough Gallery in London, February 1964 and Marlborough-Gerson Gallery New York, February 1965.

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M. T.

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